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## Latin America, Globalization, Sexuality, and the City: *disClosure* interviews Patrick O'Connor

Chad Barbour  
*University of Kentucky*

Bess Fox  
*University of Kentucky*

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Chad Barbour and Bess Fox

## Latin America, Globalization, Sexuality, and the City

disClosure interviews Patrick O'Connor

(31 March 2001)

Patrick O'Connor is Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of Chicago. He has written a number of articles and book chapters on twentieth-century Latin American novels, Latin American film, and U.S. and Latin American popular culture. His current manuscript, provisionally titled *Paper Dolls and Spider Women: Latin American Fiction and the Narratives of the Perverse*, is a queer theory study of mid-twentieth century Latin American novels. Most of his current research focuses on films about and fiction from Buenos Aires, the metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Havana before the Revolution, and Paris after it. O'Connor has also written on aesthetics and politics in the works of Walter Benjamin and Julio Cortázar.

In Spring 2001, O'Connor was invited to participate in the thirteenth annual Committee on Social Theory Distinguished Speaker Series entitled "Metropolis" at the University of Kentucky. His talk, "The Backstage of Postmodernity," explored representations of Latin American cities in late twentieth century U.S. and European fiction and film, and drew connections between narratives of heterosexual desire and the stylizing of Latin American history and culture.

Our interview with O'Connor opens with a discussion of the relationships between scholars who study cities and the specific cities that are their objects of interest. From there, our conversation turns to focus on other dynamics that inform theoretical

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understandings of "The City" and cities—globalization, sexuality, and gender—and wraps up with a consideration of the interplay between memory, the unconscious, history, and culture.

**disClosure:** In your talk yesterday, you worked with the terms "peripheral" and "center" in an attempt to understand the relationship between cities like Buenos Aires and those like Paris. This made us think about the positional issues involved when a Chicago theorist investigates Buenos Aires. Could you talk about how you negotiate this relationship, a relationship that is possibly embedded in a power imbalance?

**Patrick O'Connor:** Most cultural work I've done has been on lesbian and gay topics. And there I don't get the neo-colonial animus I would if I were interested in topics that relate to rich and poor. Maybe I ought to be getting it—it is now somewhat common in discussions of the globalization of sexuality to say that the U.S. gay tourist industry is energetic but Eurocentric UN organizations are all exporting the Euro-American "gay identity"—but so far everybody I've met in Buenos Aires has understood the varieties and situatedness of identity discourses.

I suppose like many people who think they can get away with these kinds of things until they're called on it, I always hope that good will is enough, that nobody thinks I'm trying to screw them over, that nobody thinks I'm trying to create a career off the backs of their evidence. From time to time, virtually every literary critic, every academic regardless of field, must feel that he or she is just a leech on the real talent. I would like to think that there is nothing more required than to just show up, smile, and not step on anybody's toes. And that, I guess, is all I would say about negotiating the relationship.

But I have more to say in terms of the actual word "Chicago" as a loaded term in Latin Americanist discourse. When I go to a place like Buenos Aires, people associate the University of Chicago with Milton Friedman and the neo-conservative school of Chicago economics. The "Chicago Boys" was a phrase heard repeatedly in putting Chile onto the capitalist map when Pinochet was in power, and these associations are going to be reinforced in Argentina now that the new finance minister is a Chicago-trained economist. The "Chicago Boys" didn't have much success in Chile over the medium haul, but they had a short-term gain that the Right itself remembers. The Left remembers, of course, not just counter-revolutionary repression, but also all the union busting that took place under Pinochet. This image of "Chicago" in Latin American studies is unfortunately incomplete. My own experience at the University of Chicago, which I'll tell anyone who is willing to hang around to listen, is that much of the university's anthropology depart-

ment (first in the nation) is committed to a political anthropology usually associated with indigenous rights and other leftist politics. The university is small physically, and its economics department and its anthropology department are across a very small quadrangle. So, I tell them they should imagine that I come from an institution where bows and arrows are being shot at the economics department from very close range. However, all the force of non-governmental organizations, which can be very liberal at times, and all the force of anthropology departments in the United States is not going to be equal to the power of various economic planning movements because they have the IMF and they have the money.

In terms of physical movement, I've been finding more and more requests on e-mail lists for programs that will bring more Latin American intellectuals to the United States so that the movement, the physical movement, isn't all in one direction. We will occasionally (very rarely) all parachute into Buenos Aires or Santiago, give a talk, invite a couple of local intellectuals, and then clear out. Much more often, unfortunately, we have conferences in Lexington or Kansas or Chicago, and though we try to invite people, we seldom have enough money to invite many of them. So, one of the topics in the rather rich U.S. academy is how to make sure that local intellectuals in Latin America get a part of the pie. Rather than one-way programs, there need to be more exchange programs that allow Latin American scholars to come to the United States. Of course, these programs depend on the continued health of the humanities and the continued health of U. S. academia, a health that is in question considering the recent economic downturn.

**dC:** You mention at the end of "'Melancolia Protena' and Survivor's Guilt: A Benjaminian Reading of Cortazar's *El Examen*" that you were about to go to Buenos Aires for the first time. I wonder if you could talk about both what it is like to visit a city after you have theorized about it and also how you position yourself when you are there.

**PO:** I wouldn't say I theorized about Buenos Aires before I traveled there; I will say I theorized about its image as it appeared in various texts. And since many of these texts were non-realist, there was certainly a level of unreality to my travels. This was especially true because, first, I had never seen many movies or photos of the streets of Buenos Aires, and, second, I don't read the travel sections of newspapers at all and I read the obligatory Lonely Planet etc. guidebooks very badly. In short, I am a god-awful tourist. Yet to know that your reactions to a country are idiosyncratic and "unrepresentative" can also be liberating. Since I'm god-awful at being a tourist, I react to tourist traps differently than either the naïve but competent tourist or the "sophisticated traveler" does. So, although I don't think I'm much different from anyone else in his or her open-minded encounter with the Other—I go



to confirm or reject my hypotheses and discover the prejudices I had that had never risen to the level of hypotheses—my hypotheses are academic or textual and my mode of testing them rather scattershot. For instance, the two summers I've spent in Buenos Aires, I lived in apartments that didn't have television. While the friends of friends I stayed with showed me how to drink *yerba mate*, a "typical" piece of Argentine culture (which for that very reason I already knew about), I never learned anything about what Argentines watch on television. To not know anything about the television culture of a country is something that right now is very strange. Buenos Aires gets dozens of cable channels, and virtually all of them are from the United States. I think anyone who writes about a certain topic is going to discover his or her own limits, and to be aware of what you're missing is something that some of us are better at than others, and I think I'm pretty good at it.

**dC:** We'd like you to talk more about Buenos Aires in terms of its place in global culture. Cities like Buenos Aires, Calcutta, and Rio de Janeiro are not the cities associated with "metropolis" in the Western cultural imagination. What role do these cities play in the western theoretical understanding of "The City"?

**PO:** Well, for myself—partly because I'm someone who studies the so-called "Third World" and partly because they've got more people—Calcutta, Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City are the cities that I associate with the word "metropolis." But sometimes, I suppose, people try to cordon off what they dislike about the world's huge cities by invoking the word "megalopolis." That way, a "metropolis" is cool, but a "megalopolis" is dirty. So, you could say, "Mexico City: megalopolis, Tokyo: metropolis," or something like that. But, of course, there are more serious attempts to distinguish between the different functions of the world's big cities. As something of an amateur in this field I'm working through the essays in the Paul L. Knox and Peter J. Taylor anthology *World Cities in a World System*, which has essays by people, like my University of Chicago colleague Saskia Sassen, who are doing hardcore demographics, politics, and economics. Since about 1985 there's been a critical consensus that some cities have a special role in managing the global economy. These cities are where the financial instruments are invented, where the NGO's are headquartered, where the CEO's actually live. The essays discuss the difference between living in a city like Denver, which isn't part of world networks, and living in a city like New York, which is immersed in the financial industry. What happens if you're a bus driver in a city that makes its money from local industries versus a bus driver in a city that makes its money through global networks? How much of a mind-set difference is there?

Naturally, since I study literature, I ask that same question about novelists. How does it affect a novelist to live in a new global city or in a city

not connected to the global economy? I've noticed the way authors identify themselves as global citizens has changed dramatically since the 1960s. In the 1960s Latin American novelists like García Márquez or Cortázar worked with a model of global citizenship that required leaving Bogotá, Colombia or wherever, getting funded by a newspaper to travel first to Italy and then to Paris, and there scraping a living sending articles back. But when they sat down and wrote, they wrote about their hometown in Argentina or in Colombia. That is a very old-fashioned modernist (or belated modernist because we're talking about the 1950s and early 1960s) type of self-presentation. Then there is the contemporary writer Manuel Puig, who wrote *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and earlier books like *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *Heartbreak Tango* (*Boquitas Pintadas* in Spanish). Puig wrote a good deal of his second and third novels in New York while he was a ticket clerk at Air France. He was living in Queens because it was a short drive to the airport. With his frequent flyer miles, he and his mother, who still lived in Buenos Aires, would travel everywhere. And when he became semi-famous in Argentina with his second novel, interviewers would meet him at the airport counter. The city Puig imagines living in is a not-quite city. Penning some of his novels in English, some in Portuguese, Puig wrote airless, not-quite cityscapes, so that all you get is the jail and the Hollywood movie in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

There's a definition of a city that happens through the itinerary of a person. If the itinerary of a person is going to Paris and then to a suburban house in the outskirts of France and then back to Paris to work as a translator, which is Cortázar's trajectory, you get an image of the city that is very different from someone who lives out of a suitcase a couple of blocks away from the airport. But New York is a global city. Global cities that have some relationship to international capital are going to be different from Buenos Aires, which right now is losing out in global competition to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Knox and Taylor's book actually has a chart titled "Which are the Global Cities?" acknowledging that competing with other cities is one characteristic of municipalities in a globalized economy. And in 1985 Buenos Aires was one of the global cities, but in the 1995 second edition it isn't, and I'm guessing that, with its continued stock market instability and the stagnation associated with its inflexible dollarization policy, in 2005 it won't be on that chart either. It's been put underneath the bar, among a group of global city wanna-be's. And I'm genuinely, if a bit ironically, sorry to see that.

**dC:** These theoretical understandings of "the city" can be relevant in many different ways. One particularly intriguing understanding that you've explored is the mapping of the city onto the body. In "For Carnival, Clinic, and Camera" you talk about female impersonators and



how they perform gender throughout a variety of discourses. How does Buenos Aires as a city play into that performance? Is there something "special" about Buenos Aires in terms of the performance of gender?

**PO:** The first part of the answer is to say that in many ways it isn't special. The essay was about the turn of the century and much more of the research was done by my co-author Jorge Salessi than myself. I worked with him at various points in the article but he was the main author of the essay, and since then his book *Médicos, maleantes, y maricas* (Medics, Crooks, and Tango Queens) has been published in Argentina. In the early days of lesbian and gay studies, we all sat down and read Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault said that there was a shocking and fascinating collusion between the police apparatus and the sexological apparatus at the turn of the century. Naturally, he didn't say anything specifically about Argentina, but Jorge went in and looked and found that the same thing that was happening in Europe was also happening in Argentina, just fifteen years later. In addition, in Italy in the 1890s, Ernesto Lombroso was making arguments about criminality of the various degenerate races and lo and behold, in different journals for specialists in this period in Argentina, people are saying identical things and quoting Lombroso. That's why, in a sense, it could be argued that there is nothing different.

**dC:** But there is still some kind of uniqueness, isn't there?

**PO:** The specificity of Buenos Aires lies in the newness of the city into which these sexual discourses were taking root. In contrast, Paris has been around for seven hundred years (though many people would argue that places like Paris and London also rebuild themselves during the same period). Although Buenos Aires exists as a city in the eighteenth century, because of the length of the civil wars of the nineteenth century, it doesn't consolidate as the center of Argentine politics and culture until about 1870. So, it pulls itself up out of nothing. There was a very strong sense that the intellectuals would also be the statesmen of this new city in the 1870s. And many of them were doctors, many of them were hygienists, and many of them were doing things like draining the sewers and putting together a map of the city. And when there was a cholera epidemic in 1870, they drained parts of the city that needed to be drained (so the epidemic wouldn't happen again); yet, they ignored those parts of the city where the poor people lived. The difference to me is that some of these intellectuals are people I'm reading in literature classes because they're also people writing short stories and things like that; whereas, nobody reads short stories by Ernesto Lombroso. I guess sometimes Otto Weininger is read in courses on *fin-de-siècle* German literature.

Another kind of specificity, which Buenos Aires shares with some,

though not all, great cities, is the notion of it as a port city. Jorge Salessi had a theory that I subscribe to, also found in George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, which is about the beginning of the gay subculture in New York City up to 1940. There is a lot of overlap between the cultures of Buenos Aires and New York City in terms of anonymous people coming through, a higher percentage of men than women, a burgeoning working-class consciousness, and sexualities, which are being forged in these working-class cities. A common situation in Buenos Aires, Rio, Sao Paulo, sometimes New York, and San Francisco on the other side of the continent. These were places where white-collar or elite notions were not quite as strong because of the transience of so many of the people living in these cities. In the case of Argentina, frequently people only stayed a couple of months and then they went into the interior to do various livestock and agricultural work and then they would return on their way back to Italy. Some of them only spent about six months of the year in Argentina because at that time there were package deals that would allow people called "swallow workers" to travel regularly on steamships crossing the Atlantic.

What you get in those cases is somewhat unique to Buenos Aires but with features that it shares with other cities. For example, Oscar Montero and other researchers have been working very hard to try to find something like a gay subculture in Havana at the turn of the twentieth century. And once again there's so much more censorship going on—self-censorship as well as real censorship—going on in terms of the newspapers. Public scandals don't get quite as scandalous. In these places, people managed to stifle scandal a little more successfully because of the difference in literacy rates; since only the more high-toned people would buy newspapers they could exercise more censorship on them. An important exception takes place in Mexico City in 1901, when 41 men are arrested at a drag ball, and it gets into the newspapers and even into popular culture like the *Skeletons* of the caricaturist Posadas. But the first "media event homosexual scandal" in Buenos Aires doesn't happen until the 1940s, and involves the cadets of a military school: Perón takes advantage of it to call for the legalization of (female) prostitution.

**dC:** The carnival tradition is another aspect of "For Carnival, Clinic, and Camera." How does that contribute to Buenos Aires as a site for performing gender?

**PO:** Buenos Aires does have a strong carnival tradition, but as far as there was a carnival tradition in Mexico it didn't work the same way, and if there were one in New York, it probably wouldn't work that way at all. But Rio, Sao Paulo, and Buenos Aires do have strong Mardi Gras/Carnival traditions. And the indications are that that was not only a point of departure for people to get to know each other and say,



"Well, let's have carnival twelve months of the year. Why wait for that week just before Lent?" It also becomes kind of a social model that can be used elsewhere. Richard Parker, who does work mostly on Brazilian sexualities, has gone the farthest in arguing that Carnival is an important, all-purpose metaphor for a kind of sexuality which says, "We're going to have rules eleven months of the year but this month anything goes." And that that model can be extended to say, "With our wives or our children we have rules, but when I'm out on my own anything goes." Likewise, that kind of attitude could almost define sexuality itself: sexuality could come to mean, "any transgression of everyday modes of bodily interactions." Although this is a model for sexuality which is an exciting one to put in with all the other models of sexuality that depend on Freudian vocabulary about object choice, the Oedipal triangle, and all the rest of it, I don't think it can function independently of them. Some theorists imply not only that carnivalization affects all of these other models but also that it is actually what sexuality is. You can see it as a radical extension of the Freudian libido, the notion that our bodies become fluid and so on. Parker has pushed for that for Brazil. Nevertheless, a lot of people I know don't think that their experiences, at least nowadays in Argentina, are particularly described by such a model.

dC: And the camera? Where does that come in?

PO: The reason that Jorge Salessi got very excited about finding these journals by criminologists and medical criminologists about *fin-de-siècle* drag culture was that he found that one of the things they did in these private parties was exchange photographs with each other. And so that's where the camera comes in the title. It also suggests that rather than a Carnival image, other kinds of theatrical images/metaphors should be invoked because most of the people who were dressing up as divas in these photographs tended to take from the iconology of opera singers and the big posters you get outside of large theaters. Although the metaphor of the Carnival is there, there is also the metaphor of the diva. And I guess if I had a more general theoretical comment to make about the difference between different drag cultures in different places it would be some kind of version of *cherchez la femme*. If you're going to be part of a diva culture, a drag culture, you're almost always going to be invoking some kind of larger-than-life female figure, which you're going to inhabit in your drag role. So one of the ways that these things shake out in mildly different forms depends on what kind of famous women there are. To sum up, Argentina is not completely unique but if you put them all together—Carnival, Clinic, and Camera—you get something which will at least give some sense of its specificity.

I don't think it's at all an accident that many cultural studies of sexuality—even the more literary studies I'm currently working on—con-

stantly return to the *fin-de-siècle*, which of course is not just the moment of Wilde and early Gide but also of Freud. I'm completing my manuscript on queer theory and the Latin American novel: *Paper Dolls and Spider Women: Latin American Fiction and the Narratives of the Perverse*. Even though the center of gravity of the book is the novelists of the mid-century—Lezama Lima through Cortázar through Puig—a motif I couldn't get away from was these authors' return to the *fin-de-siècle*: either abjecting it homophobically as García Márquez and Fuentes do, celebrating it in its difference from vulgar nationalism as Lezama Lima does, or invoking it more subtly as Puig and Cortázar do. I was a graduate student at Yale just as Sylvia Molloy, who was there then, was turning her attention towards Latin American *fin-de-siècle* sexuality and I'm proud to say I was her student. Working with her and with Roberto González Echevarría there no doubt partly explains why my projects often feature Argentina and Cuba so prominently, although one hardly needs an excuse to relate Cuban literature to gay studies or queer theory.

dC: Could you speak further as to how the camera operates in terms of cinematic representations of Buenos Aires? If we think of the camera as the male gaze, can Buenos Aires be viewed as the female?

PO: I'm tempted to run through a lot of things that are cliché but are also truisms about the male gaze and how the male gaze is equated with the camera's gaze. Laura Mulvey argued it and had to make it a little more complex later when talking about things like women's film. So, we accept that there are such things as a female gaze and a male gaze. And we also accept what's been done in queer theory which suggests that there are moments of crossings, ambivalence, and ambiguities where you don't even know whether you're supposed to be a guy looking at the guy, a guy looking at the girl, a girl looking at the guy, or a girl looking at the girl. We also note that, for various reasons, avant-garde queer theory aside, there has been a spectacularization of the male body over the last forty-five or fifty years.

I don't think that Buenos Aires is the woman in Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson*. I think Pablo Verón, Potter's dance instructor, is forced to represent Buenos Aires, and is the spectacularized object of the female gaze. No matter how much there is in the plot of the movie that states that Verón hasn't been in Buenos Aires in seven years and that he considers himself cosmopolitan and/or Parisian, his status as a tango dancer forces him into the position of representing Buenos Aires. But of course you're right, it is common to figure a city or a nation as a woman, and thereby as the object of our cinematic gaze. An Argentine film opened just after *The Matrix* that had many of its tricks. This one was a film called *La Sonámbula* (The Sleepwalking Woman). I was excited to see it partly because the script was written by Ricardo Piglia, who is prob-



ably right now the most prestigious novelist in Argentina.

This movie *La Sonámbula* turns out to be a constant fever dream of all of these paranoid motifs in which a woman wakes up without memory of the past. She's told that there's been this epidemic of amnesia and she has to go back and recover her own identity and her own past. She sees all these people with disfiguring blotches on their faces, and she encounters both stereotypical blue-collar anarchists and mad scientists, and the film is cross-cut jarringly; in many ways it feels *Matrix*-like and also in many ways feels like a very Argentine film. It's a film which implies that in some ways a woman's quest through the city is actually a way to piece together a city that has fallen apart and that her own fragmentation is partly related to the idea that the polity has been fragmented as well. And in many ways it's like a U.S. road movie where you go from one part of America to another. Sometimes the woman is treated that way by a male gaze. And there's no doubt this very good-looking woman is the object of a male gaze that is lovingly but somewhat sadistically putting her through all of these paces. So that would be an example of putting together the city through the body of a woman.

In 1992 Piglia wrote a novel called *The Absent City*, which has just been translated, and which like *La Sonámbula* is influenced by cyber-punk, and therefore brings in variations on paranoia as a theme in literature. One part of the novel is a machine that is invented by Borges' mentor, Macedonio Fernandez. Supposedly after Macedonio's young wife dies unexpectedly he is driven mad with grief, and creates a machine that re-tells stories with the voice of his wife inside the machine. A voice that slowly gains self-consciousness and understands that she is a box trapped in a museum, suspected of treason by the government because she re-tells stories of Argentina's many dirty wars. She also obsessively re-tells the story of an older man and a younger woman trying to communicate beyond forced isolation and separation. It's a heartbreaking novel, and it has all of these moments of absurdism and black humor, and for me it would be an example of a novel that portrays the city as a woman. Especially when Macedonio's wife Elena (who in these various stories is trying to make her way through the city) is identified in many ways either with the whole nation of Argentina or with the city of Buenos Aires.

**dC:** *La Sonámbula* and its sense of cultural amnesia makes us think of the idea of Buenos Aires as a blank page, which you mentioned in yesterday's talk. What do you mean by the concept of "blank page," especially in terms of history? Is there a critical tendency to place Buenos Aires outside of H/history? Do you see yourself as contradicting this critical intuition?

**PO:** You'll see I'm of two minds on this move, and the members of the

seminar were also interested in testing the limits of the usefulness of this gesture. I feel like I am standing somewhat to the side of a consensus in academia, which I associate with a slogan from Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, which says, "Always historicize." I almost can't stop myself from historicizing everything. When somebody says something that interests or surprises me I want more context, I want to know everything about where that person came from. So I know that I'm stepping out of a critical consensus, and speaking against my own critical instincts, when I say, "You know, sometimes wiping out the history of a place may produce an artwork of aesthetic value or even of historical value." In the scene of intercultural contact what you sometimes wipe clean is the *stereotypical* history of, say, Argentina as seen from the U.S. or from Hong Kong, and the post-modern strategy I was interested in with Wang Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* was the attempt to tell a story in the alienating space of the other without recourse to the history of the other. The most common tale told on a blank canvas is the *egoïsme à deux* love story, the love story in which nothing in the world exists except the two lovers. Some forms and genres have always considered themselves an artificial space with rules independent of history. So, I have to be very narrow in saying that what I'm talking about are the rules of a genre, rules which wipe out history in order to perfect the genre. Criticism shouldn't always see such a move by an artist as a too-hasty request for historical absolutism—some sort of literary equivalent of the pardons given to the Dirty War generals; rather, dehistoricization might also have a strategic role in the evolution of a literary form.

**dC:** Memory and the relationship between past and present seem to be recurring themes in your work. In "City (E)scapes" you analyze Cortázar's attempt to "re-politicize" his memory of Buenos Aires. Could you describe further this relationship between the individual and memory? What definitions of H/history is the article manipulating?

**PO:** Walter Benjamin is part of my justification for saying that you only take on a project if you think it has some urgency for the present. But while Benjamin claimed that what he was doing was contemporary or *aktuell*, as the German say, *actual* in Spanish, Benjamin's own understanding of the contemporary was surprising. Nobody in 1927 was looking at seventeenth and eighteenth century German drama. Nobody was looking at Baudelaire in the way that he did as an allegorist of modernity.

Indeed, Benjamin in an almost psychoanalytic way finds that there are moments of history, which have a kind of deferred action upon the present. And here he moves from History with a capital "H" to individual memory. The best parts of Benjamin's autobiography, the vari-



ous memoirs that he wrote, involve moments when something happens to him and he almost tells himself that he can't remember this now but he's going to remember it later. This is different from what most of us would say of such moments, namely, "Hold onto this memory, you can't interpret it now, but you can interpret it later." It's a different use of the words "memory" and "interpretation." But most of us would agree that sometimes you salt away certain memories, saying, "I can't deal with this now" or "I will be able to figure out later why or how this moment has a meaning for me." At any rate, I found Benjamin to be the first person I'd read who really expressed that not only could such a structure refer to individual memory but also—and this is very hard for me to work out in many of my critical projects—to culture itself. Rather than saying, "Oh, Joseph Cornell or some other culture-vulture goes back to the fashions of the 1920s or the postcards of the nineteenth century and makes collage artworks out of them as an individual who is either a genius or irrelevant," rather than placing the agency entirely in the present, a Benjaminian interpretation would say, "the nineteenth century itself created these kitsch art works—fashions, postcards—in order to salt away, in order to hide, in order to conceal some kind of utopian energy; the past has made a promise to the future or demanded from the future a promise, that someday someone would redeem what was valuable about these lost utopian desires from the past."

Instead of a contemporary *aesthetic* approach, then, there's this kind of emotional and *ethical* looking for these meanings, these utopian dreams which these people may not have been consciously putting into what they wrote, into what they built, into what they made. I find this ethical regard for the *unconscious* of the past to be fruitful and unusual. Usually, the ethics of the liberal subject demands that you respect the other as a subject with free, conscious intentions only. Benjamin knows that the desires he finds in mass-cultural texts were not consciously placed there, but he thinks he found them there anyway. It's a model of consciousness that is quasi-Freudian but doesn't have to follow the usual Freudian rules of repression. Those *fin-de-siècle* drag queens in their photographs, those musicians and dancers who fixed the forms of the Argentine tango, hey, even Patti LuPone in the original Broadway cast of *Evita* in 1977, they were all expressing themselves, consciously, and yet also expressing a culture's unconscious utopian demands that now twenty-five, seventy-five, or a hundred years later, we have a responsibility to bring to our own culture's consciousness.

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